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By Michael Coleman

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Every August, members of Congress take a break from the heat of Washington, D.C., and return to their districts to meet with constituents and enjoy a little rest and relaxation.

But at town hall meetings during this year's recess, senators and representatives encountered a different kind of heat — grillings by Americans concerned about a proposed overhaul of America's health care system.

During the month of August, and into early September, New Mexico's two senators and three representatives, all Democrats, hosted town hall meetings, forums, teleconferences and one-on-one sessions with voters all over the state, from Raton to Ruidoso, Clovis to Gallup.

The delegation is now back in Washington, D.C., with Congress returning to work today and resuming debate on health care legislation.

Before they returned, the Journal asked the five New Mexico members what they learned about the health care issue during their month back home. We gave them a word limit and told them we would publish their responses in their own words. We saw it as an opportunity for the congressional members to tell New Mexicans what they would take back to the health care debate.

Here's what they had to say:

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Rep. Ben Ray Luján

"The last month was filled with travel, meetings and long drives to cities and small towns throughout New Mexico's 3rd District. Traveling an expansive district can be a challenge, but it could not be more rewarding, as it gives me an opportunity to talk with people from many communities and walks of life.

"I met with people in Farmington, Clovis, Tucumcari, Española, Santa Fe and many other cities and towns throughout the district to talk about health care, where I both listened and addressed their concerns and questions.

"I heard a wide range of opinions — from those who support a single-payer system to those who believe that our current system is working. But I was most impacted by the stories I heard about the failures of our current system.

"I heard from grown children struggling to take care of their elderly parents, from young parents who lost their jobs and insurance, and from families who are struggling to pay bills their insurance company refused to pay.

"One person told me a story of how his sister's insurance company forced her out of the hospital after heart surgery. Soon after, she passed away from complications that could have

been avoided had her insurance allowed her stay in the hospital.

"That is the status quo, and that is why I am fighting for reform.

"It was a sincere privilege to hear from so many engaged constituents, and I will take their stories back to Washington as I fight for reform."